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ABSTRACT

Because larger schools offer advantages such as a greater variety of activities, economic efficiency, and a sense of identity in the community, schools are often combined. Beyond these positive effects, however, school consolidation has some negative aspects. These liabilities include less human contact, less input from teachers in decision-making, and fewer opportunities for change. Moreover, when a school is the only source of community services, its closure has a devastating impact after consolidation. Thus, the welfare of the community should be considered before making the decision to consolidate. (RG)

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SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION

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SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION

School consolidation is the practice of combining two or more schools for educational or economic benefits. A consolidated school can offer an expanded curriculum and a more prominent identity in the community while reducing costs through economy of scale. On the other hand, consolidation can incur numerous liabilities, especially if the schools to be closed are the sole providers of community services.

How prevalent is school consolidation?

The trend toward consolidation of one-room schools began in 1918 as a reaction to perceived academic weaknesses in rural and small schools. Statistics reveal the tremendous rate of school consolidations. Ravitch (1984) reports that, while total enrollment in elementary and secondary schools nearly doubled from 1945 to 1980 (from 23 million to 40 million), the number of schools dropped from 185,000 to under 86,000. During the 1970s the number of schools in the country declined 5 percent.

What factors contribute to consolidation?

School consolidations have been justified on two primary grounds: the "bigger is better" philosophy and economic efficiency. The most powerful inducement for school consolidation is the claim that one big school is better than two smaller schools; bigger schools provide a wider range of curricular and extracurricular offerings.

Because school systems seldom have enough money, arguments based on economic efficiency have also been a powerful force propelling the school consolidation movement. In recent years, declining enrollments have been a further incentive for consolidation.

What are the positive effects of school consolidation?

Consolidation of schools has both curricular and financial advantages. First, it often enables the consolidated schools to share courses and facilities. Sharing results in a more varied curriculum because fewer classes are dropped due to low enrollment. Expenditures for capital improvements and basic maintenance are reduced because there is no need to upgrade or maintain duplicate facilities.

Because consolidation often combines classes and increases their size, fewer teachers need to be employed. Consolidated schools, moreover, do not normally employ as many administrative personnel as did the separate schools.

Consolidation of schools can also produce psychological benefits. When combined, schools often gain a confidence and an identity in the community they did not previously possess (Kay). Sports programs and extracurricular activities flourish in consolidated schools because of combined funding.

What are the liabilities of consolidation?

Some educators (for example, Beckner and O'Neal) stress the benefits of small schools and, thus, question the effectiveness of school consolidations. They suggest that small schools are able to perform functions that are impossible in larger schools. Small schools usually provide closer relations between faculty and administration, a smaller teacher-pupil ratio, and an enhanced potential for individualized instruction.

Opponents of school consolidation suggest that combining schools often produces more harm than good:

1. more red tape
2. less participation in decision-making by teachers and administrators
3. more tension between teachers and students
4. fewer situations for bringing about change
5. more time, effort, money devoted to discipline problems
6. less parent-teacher involvement
7. less human contact, producing frustration and alienation and weakening morale of both students and school staff

What factors should be considered before consolidation?

According to Kay, a leading research analyst in the school consolidation field, a school system "considering consolidation ought to investigate the nature, extent, and strength of other community institutions and social service agencies serving any community facing possible loss of its schools."

In places where the school is the sole source of community services, loss of the schools would be greatly felt. School officials in such cases should be reluctant to consolidate. Conversely, communities with strong networks of organizations and facilities are better equipped to withstand the loss of schools through consolidation.

Finally, only discussion and debate can determine the proper weight given to all elements of the consolidation issue. Concerns for economic efficiency and school size must not outweigh the effect of school consolidation on the community. Only by granting equal importance to all the major factors can decision-makers ensure that "narrow concerns about formal schooling do not unconsciously override broader educational concerns and the general well being of the community to which those broader educational concerns are intimately connected" (Kay).

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